

Byzantine 'Nationalism' and the Nicaean Empire

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The fall of Constantinople on the night of 13 April 1204 to the Venetians and the soldiers of the fourth crusade is taken as the crucial turning point of the history of the later Byzantine Empire. For many the final period of Byzantine history is nothing but the pathetic survival of a state built on the memories of its former greatness. This is in many ways far too gloomy a picture. Constantinople was to be recovered by the Byzantines in 1261; and we should not forget that the last centuries of Byzantium saw a flowering of Byzantine art and scholarship. This achievement naturally directs our attention to the period of exile, when the foundations of this 'Last Byzantine Renaissance', as it has been called, were laid. In exile the Byzantine Empire was re-established and the Byzantine heritage preserved, at a time when both appeared to be in danger of being recreated in a Latin image, for a Latin emperor and a Latin patriarch had been established in Constantinople in place of the Byzantine emperor and the Byzantine patriarch. The fall of Constantinople, indeed, produced a feeling of fatalism and despondency among the Byzantines. There was a tendency to accept the Latin conquest. The peasantry of Thrace even took pleasure in the discomfiture of the Byzantine aristocrats and intellectuals of Constantinople.¹

Some Byzantine magnates attempted to organize resistance to the Latin conquest, but even this, at least in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople, was probably done in the hope of securing a favourable bargaining position with the Latins. One

1. Nicetas Choniates, *Historia* (CSHB), p. 785, ll. 7–17.

of the great Byzantine magnates of Thrace, the Caesar Theodore Vranas, entered the ranks of the Latin aristocracy.² Even Michael Angelos, the founder of what we have come to know as the Despotate of Epiros, was willing to submit for a short while to the authority of the Latin emperor.³

The defeat of the Latins by the Bulgarians at the battle of Adrianople in March 1205 and the presumed death of the Latin Emperor Baldwin changed the situation. Michael Angelos and another Byzantine aristocrat, Theodore Laskaris, were given the opportunity to turn centres of resistance into veritable states. Theodore Laskaris was of course the more enterprising. He was the son-in-law of a previous Byzantine Emperor, Alexios III Angelos (1195–1203), and held the rank of Despot. This was normally reserved at that time for the heir-apparent of the imperial throne. Theodore had himself proclaimed emperor at Nicaea, most probably in 1206, and two years later had a patriarch elected, who claimed to be the successor of the oecumenical patriarch of Constantinople. The first act of the newly-elected patriarch Michael Autoreianos was to crown Theodore Laskaris emperor. This was of very great importance, as it symbolized that the twin pillars of the Byzantine Empire, the patriarch and the emperor, had been restored, if only in exile.⁴

I

How did the Byzantines react to the traumatic events of the previous four years, to the loss of their capital and of the institutions which had given shape to their lives? Did this ‘cosmic cataclysm’, as one Byzantine contemporary put it,⁵ compel the Byzantines to make a reappraisal of the traditional ideas and institutions around which their Empire had been built? Was their sense of identity undermined? Why, for instance, did the word ‘Hellene’ come into general use among Byzantine intellectuals during the period of exile as a synonym

2. J. Longnon, *L'Empire latin de Constantinople et la principauté de Morée* (Paris, 1949), pp. 64, 134.

3. D. M. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 28–9.

4. G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, translated by Joan Hussey (2nd edition, Oxford, 1968), p. 428 and n. 2.

5. J. Darrouzès, ‘Les discours d’Euthyme Tornikès (1200–1205)’, *REB*, XXVI (1968), 82–3.

for 'Roman', the word that the Byzantines normally applied to themselves in order to express their identity?

Until the last decades of the twelfth century when the first examples of this new usage are found,⁶ 'Hellene' had been synonymous with pagan. Most modern historians have been rather circumspect, when dealing with this new usage. Sir Steven Runciman, for example, in his work *The Last Byzantine Renaissance* is content to give it a purely cultural connotation.⁷ Professor Vakalopoulos,⁸ on the other hand, sees in it something of deep significance not only for later Byzantine history, but also for the development of modern Greek nationalism. He appears to contend that the 'oecumenical' or 'universalist' ideas which had been at the heart of the Byzantine concept of the state and which helped to define the Byzantines' sense of their identity, as the chosen people of the New Testament, lost their credibility after 1204. Even if lip service continued to be paid to such ideas, they were of little importance beside the new currents of thought that were beginning to make themselves felt. The main development is seen to be the revaluation of Byzantium's classical heritage. This had always constituted one of the strands of Byzantine civilization. But after 1204 it came to be emphasized at the expense of other elements within that civilization, in such a way that the Byzantines began to see themselves, not as the people of the New Testament, but as the heirs of the Ancient Hellenes. The Byzantine sense of identity was no longer so much 'oecumenical' as 'national'. In other words, whereas the Byzantines had formerly identified themselves as members of a polity defined by a particular religious mission, they began to identify themselves as belonging to a particular people, defined less by religious considerations than by a language and a culture which they had inherited from Classical Greece.

Professor Vakalopoulos believes that these basic ideas underlying modern Greek nationalism were formulated in the

6. R. Browning, *Greece—Ancient and Medieval* (London, 1966), p. 16; and in *JHS*, XCII (1971), 214–15.

7. S. Runciman, *The Last Byzantine Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 15–23.

8. A. E. Vakalopoulos, *The Origins of the Greek Nation: the Byzantine Period (1204–1461)* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970).

last two centuries of the Byzantine era, where they received their most coherent exposition in some of the political writings of Gemistos Plethon. The starting-point of this development is, according to Vakalopoulos, the Empire of Nicaea, which he likens to the cradle of modern Greek nationalism.

Professor Vakalopoulos has certainly had his critics. The most devastating of these⁹ sees no great change in the Byzantine concept of the state nor in the Byzantine sense of identity during the last centuries of the Empire's existence. It was impossible for the Byzantines to rid themselves of their traditional ideas about the purpose of the Empire short of apostasy. Even when they were tempted to stray from the fold of orthodoxy, they were inclined to seek consolation in the works of Julian the Apostate, rather than to formulate new ideas. The Byzantines held to a gloomy and backward-looking philosophy.

The trouble is that each side has tackled the problem from different directions and there is surprisingly little common ground between them. Professor Vakalopoulos only implies what he understands by modern Greek nationalism. Professor Mango, for his part, defines elsewhere all too clearly what he means by 'Byzantinism'.¹⁰ It is a complex of ideas that gave to the Byzantines their particular sense of identity. This turned on a view of historical development and of the role which the Byzantine Empire possessed in the unfolding of the pattern of history. History was the working of Divine Providence from the Creation to the Last Judgement. The Empire was the vessel designed by God to support and protect the Church in its mission to spread the 'Word of God' and to bring men to salvation. The Emperor was the helmsman who, with God's aid, steered this vessel. In the 'Last Days' he would go out against the 'Anti-Christ' and bring his people to Jerusalem for the Last Judgement. Such views hardly left much room for 'nationalism'. Indeed, Professor Mango make little allowance for the ways in which such a view of history might be adapted to the changing circumstances of the Byzantine Empire and dismisses the new usage of 'Hellene' as irrelevant. As a result, he never comes to grips with Professor Vakalopoulos's basic contentions.

9. C. Mango, in *JHS*, LXXXVIII (1968), 256–8.

10. C. Mango, 'Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXVIII (1965), 30–4.

The whole question appears to turn on the precise meaning of the new usage of 'Hellene'. Is it irrelevant or fundamental to the Byzantines' view of themselves in the closing period of their history? As Professor Irmscher has recently shown,¹¹ this is a question that benefits from being placed within the firm context of the period of exile, when this usage was generalized. Having accepted almost without question that Nicaea was 'the Centre of Greek Patriotism', he has then asked himself whether this patriotism looked backward to Byzantium's universalist pretensions or forward to modern Greek nationalism. His method is to examine very briefly the ideas of a series of Nicaean scholars and his conclusion is that their 'thought-world' is specifically Byzantine, bound up with the 'oecumenical' aspirations of Empire and Orthodoxy. He ends on a rhetorical note: 'the ideology and the policies derived from it were orientated according to a model that was set in the past, while, unknown to, and very probably unwilling by, their exponents, developments were already being announced to which in days to come the future would belong . . .'.¹² There is a paradox here which deserves to be examined more attentively.

II

One thing is certain: the immediate reaction of the Byzantines to the fall of Constantinople was entirely traditional. It was a divine punishment for their sins and factiousness. The parallel which the Byzantines liked to draw between themselves and the Children of Israel was enhanced. Just as the Jews had endured exile at Babylon, so the Byzantines were exiled to Nicaea. For the Byzantine historian, Nicetas Choniates, who after long wanderings reached the safety of Nicaea, the waters of Lake Askania were his waters of Babylon.¹³ But he had no need to despair. An emperor had been set up in exile at Nicaea. The new emperor Theodore Laskaris, it was fervently believed, would

11. J. Irmscher, 'Nikāa als "Zentrum des griechischen Patriotismus"', *Revue des Etudes Sud-Est Européennes*, VIII (1970), 33–47; J. Irmscher, 'Nikāa als "Mittelpunkt des griechischen Patriotismus"', *Byzantinische Forschungen*, IV (1972), 114–37.

12. Irmscher, *ibid.*, 137.

13. J. A. Van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae Orationes et Epistulae* (*Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*) (Berlin/New York, 1972), p. 205, ll. 26–30.

recover Constantinople, once the Byzantines had been cleansed of their sins; he would be a new Melchizedech or Zorobabel who would lead his people back to the new Sion—Constantinople.¹⁴

The newly-elected patriarch Michael Autoreianos considered that exile was a divine punishment for the sins of the Byzantines, but believed that the restoration of the imperial office pointed to their eventual salvation. It was a sign that God's favour would return to them. His view of the imperial office was entirely traditional. It was the essential institution upon which the state was founded. In the following passage he put forward a view of the imperial office, which would have met with the complete approval of Eusebius of Caesarea:¹⁵

God gave us the Empire as a monarchical institution in the likeness of his own government, thus setting aside for all time the disorder that results from polyarchy. He established it at the time of his incarnation, so that those who believed in Him should not behave to one another in a heedless and foolish fashion and should not in their wickedness destroy both themselves and their faith. You know how God has punished us for our sins so that we were almost in danger of being handed over to the barbarians, but He took pity on us again and restored our first born, the Empire, and raised up for us an emperor both industrious and painstaking, such as the time required. . . .

This traditional view of the imperial office was to be reiterated throughout the period of exile. It was to be formulated in a particularly high-handed manner in a letter which the Nicaean Emperor Theodore II Laskaris wrote to the Bishop of Cotrone in southern Italy. He stressed the emperor's prerogative of calling together and presiding over a general council of the Church, even claiming the right to decide questions of dogma which the council had failed to settle. He emphasized his

14. Ibid., pp. 127–8, 146–7, p. 175, ll. 24–35; *Μιχαὴλ Ἀκομινάτου τοῦ Χωνιάτου τὰ σωζόμενα*, ed. Sp. Lampros (Athens, 1879–80), I, pp. 354–5; II, pp. 257–61, 276–7, 336–7.

15. N. Oikonomidès, 'Cinq actes inédits du patriarche Michel Autôreianos', *REB*, XXV (1967), 118, ll. 37–46.

'universalist' view of the imperial office, by insisting that he would not be swayed in his decisions by considerations of language, only by those of Christian orthodoxy.¹⁶

At first sight, the experience of exile made the Byzantines cling all the more strongly to their traditional attachment to the imperial office and to their intuition that they were the chosen people of the New Testament. The repetition of traditional formulae must have provided a comforting element of continuity at a time of uncertainty. But it cloaked changes in the imperial office and in the relations between the Byzantine emperor and patriarch and other Orthodox countries. This was accompanied by a hardening of attitudes towards outsiders, whether Orthodox or Latin, and perhaps even towards Muslims.¹⁷ This is the background against which the new usage of 'Hellene' came to be generalized.

III

It goes without saying that the imperial office lay at the heart of the Byzantine constitution. This does not mean that there was no constitutional development at Byzantium. There was always some attempt to adapt the theory of imperial autocracy to the realities of the time.¹⁸ Never was this more necessary than after the fall of Constantinople in 1204, which exposed the fragility of the imperial ideal. Constitutional development during the period of exile at Nicaea was in two main directions. Efforts were made, on the one hand, to reconcile imperial absolutism with aristocratic privilege and, on the other, to place it in an 'Hellenic' context. These developments should be seen as an attempt to give the 'universalist' pretensions which the Emperors of Nicaea sought to keep alive some basis of reality in the political situation existing after the fall of Constantinople. It has to be admitted that they were to have little lasting impact upon Byzantine constitutional ideas, because at their very core

16. J. Dräseke, 'Theodoros Laskaris', *BZ*, III (1894), 512–13.

17. See A. Ducellier, 'Mentalité historique et réalités politiques: l'Islam et les Musulmans vus par les Byzantins du XIII^e siècle', *Byzantinische Forschungen*, IV (1972), 31–63.

18. See H.-G. Beck, 'Senat und Volk von Konstantinopel', *Sitzungsberichte der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Klasse, 1966, esp. pp. 71–5.

was a contradiction between 'national' and 'universalist' aspirations.

Particularly instructive is the letter of the Emperor John III Vatatzes to Pope Gregory IX.¹⁹ Its intention was to uphold the imperial claims of the Nicaean emperor against those of the Latin emperor of Constantinople. John Vatatzes insisted that he had received the gift of royalty directly from Constantine the Great, something that the Latin emperor could not claim. At the same time, the Nicaean emperor emphasized his Hellenic descent and exalted the wisdom of the Greek people. Traditional Byzantine claims are placed in the face of Latin pretensions in an 'Hellenic' context.

The imperial claims of the Latin emperors may have been one reason why greater emphasis seems to have been placed at Nicaea upon the rite of anointing an emperor than had been the case before 1204. This can also be explained as a reaction against the pretensions of the Greek emperor of Thessalonica, Theodore Angelos, who was crowned and anointed emperor, probably in the year 1227, by the Archbishop of Ohrid, Demetrios Chomatianos. The Nicaean Patriarch Germanos II protested that the archbishop was usurping a patriarchal prerogative: 'From what wild olive tree could he have extracted the oil? Whence could he have procured the unguent for coronation, the consecration and use of which were reserved for the patriarch.'²⁰

The importance attached to the rite of anointing by the emperors of Nicaea is underlined by the events of the autumn of 1254. The Emperor John Vatatzes and his Patriarch Manuel I died within a few days of one another. The new Emperor Theodore II Laskaris hastened to have a new patriarch elected, for he refused to set out against the Bulgarians until he had been anointed.²¹ The rite of anointing emphasized the unique status of the holder of the imperial office. This required greater stress, as it became increasingly difficult to reconcile imperial prerogative with aristocratic privilege and the theory of imperial

19. V. Grumel, 'L'authenticité de la lettre de Jean Vatatzès, empereur de Nicée, au pape Grégoire IX', *Echos d'Orient*, XXIX (1930), 452-4.

20. D. M. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros*, p. 92.

21. *Blemmydae Nicephori, Curriculum Vitae et Carmina*, ed. A. Heisenberg (Leipzig, 1896), pp. 41-2.

autocracy with the claims of the magnates to hereditary rank and office.

Surprisingly, an attempt to do this was made by that most autocratic of Nicaean Emperors, Theodore II Laskaris. In a treatise addressed to his favourite, George Mouzalon, he suggested that, in return for complete loyalty and obedience, a subject might expect his sovereign's friendship and that from this all the benefits he desired were likely to spring.²² This hardly amounts to the formulation of a feudal contract, as has sometimes been urged.²³ Theodore's ideas are rooted in Hellenistic philosophy. Indeed, it might be thought that this was all an intellectual game without any practical application, but it can be argued that Theodore's ideas on friendship were relevant to the needs of his time. They might have allowed him to go some way in meeting aristocratic claims, while appearing to preserve intact the theory of imperial autocracy.

After Theodore's death in 1258 these ideas were to influence the debates over the regency for his young son John IV Laskaris. The problem was: how was authority within the state to be exercised during a minority? George Mouzalon, who had been appointed regent by the dying emperor, was willing to submit this choice to the approval of an assembly of notables, which is almost certainly to be identified with the senate. He was even prepared to see the final choice of a regent vested in this assembly and argued that whomsoever it elected regent should be responsible to it and in this way it would be a guarantee of the rights of the young emperor.²⁴ Mouzalon also emphasized the importance of the mutual relationship between emperor and subject. He developed the ideas of his master Theodore Laskaris: in return for loyalty and faithful service a subject might expect a just reward from the emperor. Ironically, this had not been the case under Theodore II Laskaris. His brutality and arbitrary government had destroyed the love that ought to have provided a basis for the mutual obligations of emperor and

22. E. Lappa-Zizicas, 'Un Traité inédit de Théodore II Laskaris', *Actes du VI^e Congrès international d'Etudes Byzantines*, I (Paris, 1950), pp. 119–26.

23. N. Svoronos, 'Le serment de fidélité à l'empereur byzantin et sa signification constitutionnelle', *ibid.*, pp. 195–6.

24. Pachymeris, *Georgii, de Michaelae et Andronico Palaeologis libri tredecim (CSHB)*, I, pp. 42–6, esp. p. 45, l. 16–p. 46, l. 6.

subject.²⁵ It can be seen that in the context of a minority Theodore Laskaris's ideas on friendship were being developed in the direction of a feudal contract.

At least, this is how Michael Palaiologos, the leader of the opposition to Mouzalon, construed his speech. He put forward a different point of view, maintaining that a man who had bound himself by oath to serve the emperor was completely subject to his will.²⁶ He considered that Mouzalon's ideas about the accountability of the regent to an assembly threatened to undermine imperial authority. 'Not all of us can rule,' he said, 'not all of us can give orders, for the rule of the many is anarchy.'²⁷ His defence of the traditional authority of the emperor was paradoxically to be vindicated by his usurpation.

The debates over the regency following the death of Theodore II Laskaris allow us a glimpse of the uncertainties that in practice surrounded the nature of imperial authority during the period of exile. Outwardly, at least, it bore some resemblance to that of the 'national' monarchies that were developing in both eastern and western Europe. National aspirations came to be closely linked with an attachment to the ruling dynasty. Symptomatic of this was the ruler cult. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in Serbia, where Stephen Nemanja (c. 1166–96), the founder of the medieval Serbian state, was revered as a saint from the early years of the thirteenth century.²⁸ This calls to mind the canonization not only of St. Louis of France, but also of his contemporary, the Nicaean Emperor John Vatatzes. But whereas in France and Serbia the veneration of a saintly king went to strengthen the monarchy, in Byzantium the cult of St. John the Merciful only helped to console the Greeks of western Anatolia when faced with Turkish conquest and rule.²⁹

25. Ibid., esp. p. 44, ll. 2–4, p. 44, l. 18–p. 45, l. 3.

26. Ibid., p. 50, ll. 2–5, ll. 12–14.

27. Ibid., p. 52, ll. 10–12.

28. See D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (London, 1971), pp. 308–13; D. Obolensky, 'Nationalism in Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser. v, XXII (1972), 1–16.

29. Pachymeres II, pp. 400–2; A. Heisenberg, 'Kaiser Johannes Batatzes der Barmherzige', *BZ*, XIV (1905), 193–235.

IV

Despite the growth of 'national' consciousness among the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans, they continued to pay lip service to the 'universalist' pretensions of the Byzantine Emperor. His role as the protector of the Orthodox Church gave him real, if never properly defined, authority over the whole community of Orthodox outside the boundaries of the Byzantine state. The Emperors of Nicaea laid claim to the prerogatives which their 'Byzantine' predecessors had exercised over the Orthodox Church before 1204. Again, there was a dogged adherence to traditional ideas and formulae in the face of a new situation. The Emperors of Nicaea acted out the traditional imperial role: they called church councils and distributed their largesse throughout the Orthodox world. They took under their protection those Orthodox living under the rule of the Latins and of the Seljuqs of Rum. But, whatever their claims, there can be little doubt that their real authority within the Orthodox community was much less than that enjoyed by their predecessors. They were forced to accept that the ties binding it together had grown much weaker in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople. The Orthodox Church in Russia obtained a measure of independence. The autonomy of the Orthodox Churches in Serbia and Bulgaria was recognized by the emperors and patriarchs of Nicaea.³⁰

The relations between the autocephalous Church of Cyprus and Nicaea are revealing, because traditionally the Byzantine emperor was responsible for approving the appointment of the Orthodox archbishop of Cyprus and instituting him into his office.³¹ Despite the fact that the island of Cyprus had been conquered by the Latins, the Orthodox Church of Cyprus was almost certainly the first to recognize the legitimacy of the Orthodox patriarch installed at Nicaea. As early as 1209 the bishop of Paphos came to obtain from the newly-elected patriarch and his synod recognition of the validity of the election of the new archbishop of Cyprus. The rights of the emperor in this matter may well have been passed over, but by

30. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, pp. 240–3.

31. M. J. Angold, 'The Problem of the Unity of the Byzantine World after 1204: the Empire of Nicaea and Cyprus', *Πρακτικά τοῦ πρώτου διεθνoῦς κυπριολογικοῦ Συνεδρίου*, II (Levkosia, 1972), pp. 1–6.

the end of Theodore I Laskaris's reign they had been restored. The next archbishop of Cyprus, Neophytos, came to Nicaea to be formally instituted into his office by Theodore Laskaris.

Archbishop Neophytos gave full expression of his loyalty to the emperor of Nicaea when he wrote that he and his flock recognized the Emperor John Vatatzes as their true lord. But this is rather deceptive, for the autocephalous Church of Cyprus was to move out of its Nicaean orbit. This was largely because Archbishop Neophytos was jealous of the rights of his church and was unwilling to tolerate any interference from the patriarch at Nicaea. The Patriarch Germanos II's warning to the Cypriots of the dangers of submission to the Latin church brought forth from Neophytos a succinct statement and defence of the autocephalous status of his church and an appeal to John Vatatzes that he should stop the patriarch meddling in its internal affairs. By 1250 the archbishop was proposing that his church should become directly dependent upon the papacy, as it had once been upon the Byzantine emperor, and that Rome should be the final court of appeal for all cases coming before its courts. These proposals were enshrined ten years later in Pope Alexander IV's *Constitutio Cypria*.

Even in Epiros there was a danger that an autonomous Orthodox church would be set up. Its ruler, Theodore Angelos, conquered the city of Thessalonica in 1224 and made it the capital of his territories. He immediately had himself proclaimed emperor, but may not have been crowned until some three years later.³² Theodore and his chief ecclesiastical adviser, the canonist Demetrios Chomatianos, wished to establish an independent church, centred on the autocephalous archbishopric of Ohrid, of which Chomatianos had been archbishop since c. 1216. An attempt to obtain Nicaean recognition of its autonomous status failed in the face of the intransigence of the Nicaean patriarch and perhaps of the jealousy of the metropolitan of Thessalonica.³³ Canonical

32. L. Stiernon, 'Les origines du despotat d'Épire (suite)', *Actes du XII^e Congrès d'Études Byzantines. Ochride 1961*, II (Belgrade, 1964), pp. 197–202.

33. D. M. Nicol, 'Ecclesiastical Relations between the Despotate of Epiros and the Kingdom of Nicaea in the years 1215 to 1230', *B*, XXII (1952), 207–28; R.-J. Loenertz, 'Lettre de Geroges Bardanès, métropolitte de Corcyre, au patriarche oecuménique Germain II, 1226–1227 c.', *EEBS*, XXXIII (1964), 87–118.

relations between Epiros and the patriarchate at Nicaea were broken off. If Theodore Angelos's Empire at Thessalonica had survived, as one of the major powers in the Balkans, then the autonomous status of the church within its frontiers would almost certainly have been recognized by Nicaea. The situation was altered by Theodore's defeat at the hands of the Bulgarians in 1230 and the way was prepared for the reunification in August 1232 of the church in Epiros with the patriarchate at Nicaea.³⁴

It seems fair to suggest that in practice the nature of the Orthodox community changed radically during the period of exile. It became far more a union of churches than a single church. Nicaea might be recognized as the centre of this community, but the authority exercised by its emperors and patriarchs amounted to little more than a primacy of honour.

Nikephoros Blemmydes was perhaps the only contemporary to have grasped the significance of this new situation. He opposed Nicaean attempts to conquer the territories of other Orthodox rulers, such as the Angeloi in Epiros and the Gavalas family on the island of Rhodes. Against the official Nicaean view that they were rebels, he maintained that they possessed a hereditary right to their territories.³⁵ The Emperor of Nicaea, in his view, was only one among several Orthodox sovereigns, if the most prestigious. As an essential binding force of the Orthodox community, the imperial office had at best only an insignificant role beside the dogma and institutions of the Orthodox Church. It was for this reason that he acted as the spokesman for the autonomy of the church at Nicaea from imperial interference. He refused to accept the patriarchate at the beginning of Theodore II Laskaris's reign, even though the emperor begged him to accept it. He did not trust his former pupil's headstrong ways and certainly had no intention of becoming the emperor's 'minister of religion'.³⁶ In 1256 he was to denounce the emperor for calling together a synod of the church which he then used for blatantly political purposes: the

34. J. M. Hoeck and R.-J. Loenertz, *Nikolaos-Nektarios von Otranto, Abt von Casole: Beiträge zur Geschichte der ost-westlichen Beziehungen unter Innozenz III. und Friederich II* (Studia Patristica et Byzantina, II) (Ettal, 1965), pp. 158–9.

35. Blemmydes, p. 36, ll. 16–19, p. 62, ll. 11–21. Cf. *Blemmydae, Nicephori, Epistulae*, Appendix III of *Theodori Ducae Lascaris Epistolae*, ed. N. Festa (Florence, 1898), pp. 320–4.

36. Blemmydes, pp. 41–5, 88–9. Cf. *Acropolites*, I, pp. 106–7.

emperor induced it to put his enemy, Michael Angelos, the ruler of Epiros, and his people under an interdict.³⁷ This incident clouded relations between Blemmydes and Theodore II Laskaris. Even when the emperor was on his deathbed, Blemmydes refused to forgive him.³⁸

V

Blemmydes's views were highly idiosyncratic and never received any official sanction, but they emphasized how imperial authority was coming to be confined within a 'national' framework. Such a framework received clearer definition as a result of a hardening of traditional Byzantine attitudes to outsiders, which occurred during the period of exile. The Byzantines continued to believe that the hope of salvation and adherence to the law set them above the barbarians, who by their very nature were cruel and uncivilized. The preamble to a deed of 1246 drawn up for a monk living near Smyrna begins:³⁹

Scythians, Persians, Arabs, and the whole barbarian race hold to the custom of their fathers instead of to the law; among them instruments of torture, swords, and wars preserve for all time the natural cruelty that lies within them, whereas we are Christians who hope to stand at the Last Judgement before the all-seeing eye of the Lord Christ.

It was not just religion that separated the Byzantines from other peoples. Such a consideration did not apply in the case of the Slav peoples of the Balkans. These were distinguished from the Byzantines rather by race and language. During the period of exile the racial and linguistic differences between the Byzantines and the Bulgarians were particularly emphasized. The Nicaean historian George Akropolites thought that it was perfectly natural that the Bulgarians living in the Nicaean territories in Macedonia should join their compatriots and revolt against the rule of the Nicaean *alloglossoi*.⁴⁰

37. Blemmydes, pp. 45–7.

38. Ibid., pp. 47–8, p. 89, ll. 9–13.

39. F. Miklosich and J. Müller, *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi sacra et profana* (Vienna, 1860–90), IV, p. 203, ll. 19–22.

40. Akropolites, I, p. 108, ll. 2–4.

By the same token it was expected that the Byzantines of Macedonia would throw off the Bulgarian yoke and accept Nicaean rule. This emerges most clearly from the speech made in September 1246 by a leading citizen of the Macedonian town of Melnik, when its people were debating whether or not to surrender their town to the Nicaean Emperor John Vatatzes. It deserves to be quoted in full:⁴¹

The rule of Kallimanos's son (i.e. the Bulgarian Tsar Michael Asen [1246–56]) will mean for us oppression. It was only a hope that Kallimanos (i.e. the Bulgarian Tsar Koloman Asen [1241–46]) would live to be a man and that, reaching manhood, when it is possible to distinguish the good man from the worthless, he would have granted us his favour rather than his ill-will. An evil stroke of fortune has taken this hope away from us; and for us it is just a question of another child ruling over the Bulgarians. We shall perhaps appear worse than stupid if we abandon ourselves to further misfortune, by choosing to pass our lives without a ruler, a condition that gives rise to so many sufferings. Since the Emperor of the 'Romans' ('Byzantines') happens to be close at hand, we ought to entrust ourselves to him, since he is a good ruler, who not only perceives whether a man is good or bad, but also has a rightful claim upon us; for our region used to form a part of the 'Roman' ('Byzantine') Empire. The Bulgarians in their grasping way made themselves masters of Melnik, even though we all originally came from Philippopolis and are by race pure 'Romans' ('Byzantines'). There is another reason why the Emperor of the 'Romans' ('Byzantines') has a just and true claim upon us, even if we have been subjected to the Bulgarians. His son, the Emperor Theodore, is the son-in-law of the late Emperor of the Bulgarians Asan (i.e. Ivan Asen II [1218–41]); and now [Theodore's] wife, the daughter of the said emperor, has become and been proclaimed Empress by the 'Romans' ('Byzantines'). All that has been said previously is rendered irrelevant by these considerations; and it is our duty to go to him (i.e. the Emperor John Vatatzes) and to bow our necks to the yoke of his servitude; for the yoke of wise and venerable

41. Ibid., pp. 76–7.

emperors is more beneficial and far easier to bear than that of child rulers.

This speech had the desired effect. The people of Melnik surrendered their town to the Nicaean emperor. One can be sure that this speech contained a great deal of Nicaean propaganda, but it is none the less instructive. Possibly, the fear of living without an effective ruler together with John Vatatzes's reputation as a wise and just ruler were the main practical considerations which persuaded the people of Melnik to open their gates to the Nicaean forces. Their action could be justified on the ground that the son of the Nicaean emperor had a claim to the town in his wife's right, but there was also the question of race. The people of Melnik claimed to be pure 'Romans' ('Byzantines') and therefore quite distinct from the Bulgarians.

Considerations of race and language did not apply to the Greeks of Epiros. The Nicaeans regarded them as their *homophyloi* but they were enemies who were not to be trusted.⁴² Experience had taught that their submission brought with it no loyalty.⁴³ But the gulf separating the Greeks of Nicaea and Epiros appears to have gone deeper than this. The Epirots were deemed to have no share in Nicaea's 'Hellenic' heritage. George Akropolites must have had such a consideration in mind when he insisted that the Pindos mountains separated Epiros from 'our Hellenic land' (*Hellenis*).⁴⁴

This 'Hellenic land', or Hellas, as it was sometimes called, was identified by some writers of the time even more narrowly. For Theodore II Laskaris it was the Nicaean territories in Asia Minor.⁴⁵ In some way this was an artificial and rhetorical usage, much like the convention adopted by intellectuals during the period of exile of referring to Nicaea as a New Athens,⁴⁶ but it was not completely so. Most clearly it mirrored a cultural identity which was brought into focus by the experience of exile. If exile enhanced the parallel between the Byzantines and the

42. E.g. A. Dmitrievskij, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisej* (Kiev, 1895), I, pt 1, p. 790, ll. 25–6: *ὁμοφίλους . . . ἐχθρά καθ' ἡμῶν φρονοῦντας καὶ ἀσπονδά*.

43. Acropolites, I, p. 167, ll. 20–3; Pachymeres, I, p. 137, ll. 10–15.

44. Acropolites, I, p. 166, ll. 5–7.

45. Theodore Laskaris, p. 165, ll. 23–4, p. 176, ll. 52–3.

46. See H. Hunger, 'Von Wissenschaft und Kunst der frühen Palaiologenzeit', *JÖBG*, VIII (1959), 128.

Children of Israel, so was another parallel strengthened, that with the 'Ancient Hellenes'. Like them, the Nicaeans found themselves surrounded by a barbarian sea that threatened to overwhelm them; and they too were able to throw the barbarians back. The Patriarch Germanos II compared John Vatatzes's victory over the Latins of Constantinople at Poimanenon in 1224 to the victories of Marathon and Salamis.⁴⁷

The new usage of 'Hellene' to mean 'Byzantine' may have stemmed from the need felt by the Byzantines to stress the gulf that separated them from the Latins, who also had some claim to be considered 'Romans'.⁴⁸ This became all the more necessary during the period of exile when it became apparent that the Latins posed a threat to that cultural superiority which the Byzantines had always taken for granted.

Theodore II Laskaris led the fight against barbarism at the Nicaean court and believed that it was his duty to foster the study of philosophy since there was a danger that 'Philosophy' would abandon the Byzantines and find refuge among the Latins.⁴⁹ On one occasion, a disputation took place between scholars of the Nicaean court and members of a Hohenstaufen embassy. Theodore Laskaris claimed that victory went to the Nicaean party and believed that this reflected great credit upon the Hellenes.⁵⁰

The new usage of 'Hellene' was limited to a small circle of scholars at the Nicaean court and emphasized the cultural identity of the Byzantines as the heirs of the 'Ancient Hellenes', but it ought also to be placed in the wider context of a patriotism which the struggle to recover Constantinople had intensified and narrowed. Indicative of this was the grant made on the eve of the reconquest of Constantinople to a monastery near

47. J. Nicole, 'Bref inédit de Germain II, patriarche de Constantinople (Année 1230), avec une recension nouvelle du chrysobulle de l'empereur Jean Ducas Vatacès', *REG*, VII (1894), 77, l. 12.

48. See R. Browning, in *JHS*, XCII (1971), 214; H.-G. Beck, 'Reichsidee und nationale Politik im spätbyzantinischen Staat', *BZ*, LIII (1960), 92. An example from the period of exile shows how 'Hellene' was used to emphasize the differences between Byzantine and Latin. Nikephoros Blemmydes (p. 4, l. 17) refers to north-western Asia Minor which was still under Latin rule when he visited it, as not yet being under 'the sceptre of the Hellenes'.

49. Theodore Laskaris, pp. 8–10.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 174–5.

Smyrna by the widow of a high Nicaean functionary. This was done in memory of her husband's great exertions on behalf of 'Romania'.⁵¹ It was a patriotism that stemmed at least in part from attachment to the soil of Anatolia. In the summer of 1256 Theodore II Laskaris sent an official letter to the cities of Asia Minor announcing his victory over the Bulgarians. This he dedicated to 'our Holy Mother Anatolia'.⁵²

There was another side to this love of Anatolia. This was a growing xenophobia. The massacre by the Byzantines of the Armenians living in the Troad, which occurred in 1205, is possibly best described as an accident of war.⁵³ A better example of xenophobia is to be seen in John Vatatzes's attempt to convert the Jews settled within his territories by force to Christianity.⁵⁴ He also tried to prevent the import of foreign cloth in order to foster the domestic industry.⁵⁵ The same spirit is to be apprehended in the military reforms that his son, Theodore II Laskaris, projected, but did not live to complete. He wished to exclude all foreigners from his army and to recruit his troops entirely from his own subjects.⁵⁶ Xenophobia can also be seen at a more personal level. Gregory of Cyprus, the future patriarch, left his native island in order to seek a more congenial education at Nicaea which was renowned as a centre of learning. He wished to sit at the feet of the most famous of Nicaean scholars, Nikephoros Blemmydes. But Blemmydes's students refused to allow him to approach their master not only because he was poor, but also because he was a foreigner.⁵⁷

VI

These attitudes hardly stemmed directly from a consciousness of a 'Hellenic' past. The Jews had been persecuted at Byzantium

51. Miklosich and Müller, op. cit., IV, pp. 235–6.

52. Theodore Lascaris, p. 281, ll. 73–4.

53. Nicetas Choniates, pp. 796–7, p. 814, ll. 16–19.

54. F. Dölger, *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reiches*, III (Munich–Berlin, 1932), no. 1817.

55. Gregoras, I, pp. 43–4.

56. Theodore Lascaris, pp. 58–9.

57. W. Lameere, *La tradition manuscrite de la correspondance de Grégoire de Chypre, patriarche de Constantinople (1283–1289)* (Brussels/Rome, 1937), p. 181, ll. 15–23.

before this. Xenophobia can almost be said to have been a Byzantine characteristic. Racial exclusivity, at least among the upper classes, was part of the Byzantine belief in their innate superiority, as a chosen people. The Byzantines also displayed a strong attachment to their native land. One has only to think of those citizens of Adrianople who were deported in 813 by the Bulgarian ruler Krum to the lands beyond the Danube. Nearly twenty-five years later they were to fight their way back to Byzantine territory.⁵⁸

Does this mean that the new usage of the word 'Hellene' was indeed irrelevant? I believe that it only appears irrelevant if it is considered in isolation from other developments that were taking place during the period of exile. At first sight, these display a contradictory character. There was a dogged adherence to traditional formulae. Yet, if the theory of imperial autocracy was faithfully preserved, the range of imperial authority was restricted. The authority which the Byzantine emperor exercised over the Orthodox community was noticeably reduced: his power was effectively limited to his own territories. Even within these the emperor was forced to take account of the increased power of the aristocracy in government and society. The bureaucratic machinery of government, the practical concomitant of imperial autocracy, disappeared and was replaced by a household form of government.⁵⁹ All in all, the Nicaean Empire displayed surprising resemblances to the kingdoms of western Europe.

This contradictory character is perhaps best explained as a reaction to the circumstances of exile which emphasized how far from reality the 'universalist' pretensions of Byzantium now were. There was an attempt—how conscious it is difficult to say—to imbue traditional ideas about the nature of the state and the identity of the Byzantines with a meaning that was relevant to the conditions of exile. 'Universalist' claims had to be accommodated to a new context which can be described as 'national', given that the Nicaeans appear to have been very conscious of their identity, even going so far as to exclude the

58. See A. Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 73–4.

59. See M. J. Angold, *A Byzantine Government in Exile. Government and Society under the Laskarids of Nicaea (1204–1261)* (Oxford, 1974).

Greeks of Epiros. It is certainly true that their identity was built on claims that their state was the heir of Byzantium, but the fall of Constantinople meant that the precise meaning of 'Byzantine' or 'Roman' was in doubt. It was given altered significance by correlating it with 'Hellene', thus placing the identity of the Byzantines ('Romans') in a more precise cultural, linguistic, and racial context.

One is not dealing with revolutionary changes in modes of thought. It is rather that a traditional framework of ideas was given new meaning. The transference of Constantinople's 'oecumenical' claims to Nicaea could only mean that they would be developed within a 'national' context. But we are dealing with potential rather than actual developments. The radical reinterpretation of Byzantine ideology along 'national' lines was cut short by the reconquest of Constantinople. 'Universalist' pretensions were vindicated and revitalized. This comes out very strongly in the great speech which Michael VIII Palaiologos made on hearing the wonderful tidings of the recovery of Constantinople.⁶⁰

You know . . . how formerly God in His wrath stirred up contrary winds, how our ancestors were driven from their homeland by the Latins, and how their Empire was much reduced as a result. . . . You know that our realm stretched inland from the sea not two or three days' journey, but ten days' or more and that is to say nothing of the islands, some of which are very large. But, because of our trespasses against Him, God willed or rather allowed this heart of our homeland, that is to say Constantinople, to suffer and all the rest to die with it, while the Latins, Persians, Bulgarians, and Serbs, and many others shared it out. There were even 'Romans' subject to the Empire who usurped authority. Our lands were limited to Nicaea, Prousa, Philadelphia, and the surrounding districts. Is there any need to say that other areas were recovered and through God's mercy were slowly brought back to life? But while the Queen of Cities lay outside our rule, control over all these regions remained uncertain. Did it not so happen that, when we exchanged embassies, we were repulsed and ridiculed as men without a state forced by

60. Pachymeres, I, pp. 153–7.

necessity to sojourn far from the imperial throne? It was ridiculous when our homeland could only be pointed out by the stars for us to seek the rest of the Empire and to claim its return from those that held it. And to this end our predecessors as emperor suffered much—and until recently so did I—but to no purpose, for it was useless to lie awake when the City was guarded. In vain was the suffering of those who tried to take the city straightaway. These things are in the hands of God, of God who knows how to defend a city which being unprotected is thought to be in danger and how to abandon to the hands of the enemy one garrisoned by mighty warriors, for, though we got together great forces and to do this went through many difficulties, and though our forces far outnumbered the inhabitants of the City, yet nothing was achieved. In this way God showed that giving and receiving are the work of His mercy alone. Now the day of grace has come. How strange it is that this good fortune should occur while we are reigning! It is proper for us to give thanks for the recovery of our homeland and to hope that, just as it has fallen to us without our demanding it, so, in similar fashion, will the rest of the Empire. Justice has come full circle. Those who were formerly overweening have, with God's help, been humbled. Our fathers did not see God's mercy, but we being their sons have seen it, because God's beneficence and punishments are for the most part meted out not to people but to generations. And so it happened in the olden times. God promised to the fathers that 'Good Land' formerly announced to Abraham; He ordered them straightway to depart from Egypt and to take possession of it. Yet they left their bones in the wilderness, but His assurance was fulfilled to their sons, and thus His promise was not broken.

The restoration of the seat of Empire to Constantinople together with Michael Palaiologos's struggle to recover the lost provinces of the Empire meant that the revaluation of Byzantium's classical heritage which took place during the period of exile was not given any political expression.⁶¹ The ideas that were forming during that period remained no more

61. See C. Mango, 'Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder', *DOP*, XXII (1963), 69.

than an undercurrent of thought during the last phase of Byzantine history. They briefly emerge during the fifteenth century in the political writings of Gemistos Plethon.⁶² His ideas for the regeneration of the Byzantine Peloponnese with their emphasis upon a national army and economic protectionism echo the policies of the emperors of Nicaea.

The framework of Plethon's political ideas, like that of the Nicaean intellectuals, remained solidly Byzantine.⁶³ Like them, but far more consciously, he attempted to develop traditional Byzantine ideas about the nature of the state and the identity of the Byzantines along 'national' lines. Given the desperate situation of the Byzantine Empire in the fifteenth century, Plethon's ideas were of little practical importance. The failure of the Nicaean attempt to transform Byzantine ideology was more serious. It perhaps helps to explain the impotence of the Byzantine state after the failure of Michael VIII Palaiologos's attempt to recover Byzantium's lost provinces, for the Byzantines were thrown back on what has been called 'Messianic Byzantinism'. This was an entirely sterile philosophy. Its core was the conviction that the Empire was in its last days and that the Last Judgement was at hand. Perhaps this has distorted our view of Byzantine ideology, as a whole, and has left the impression that it was far more rigid than was actually the case and that it could not be adapted to changing circumstances.

Indeed, one of the most remarkable characteristics of Byzantium would appear to have been the ability to fit itself to the many different situations that it faced in the course of its long history. As the history of the Nicaean Empire shows, it was even possible to adapt to the circumstances of exile, but the fruitful developments which resulted were cut short. It is this which is of real historical importance. It is of much less importance that some of the ideas associated with modern Greek nationalism appear to have been anticipated at Nicaea.

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62. See F. Masai, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra* (Paris, 1956), pp. 66–101, esp. pp. 87–8; E. Barker, *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 196–219.

63. See H.-G. Beck in *BZ*, LIII (1960), 86–94.